

## **Transcript – Podcast: Student Volunteering Week**

**Host:** Katie Masheter

**Speakers:** Aaron Wappler and Holly Young

**Katie:**

Hello this podcast has been brought to you by the University of the Highlands Islands careers and employability centre. My name is Katie Masheter and in this episode we're talking about volunteering. Did you know student volunteering week takes place in the first half of February every year? This helps us to look at the benefits of volunteering from improving our wellbeing, developing employability skills and contributing positively to our communities. 2021 marks the 20th year that student volunteering week has taken place. I'm joined today by Adam Wappler, who is a current student and Holly Young who's a graduate from the University of the Highlands and Islands. Both are keen to share their volunteering experiences. So first up, I'd like to introduce Aaron.

Aaron, you are a committed and driven volunteer with the Scouts in the northeast of Scotland, there's no doubt about that. But that's not all, is it?

**Aaron:**

I also volunteer with Moray Women's Aid as a trustee, and I'm still a student trustee with the Highlands and Islands Association as well. I'm also the Class Rep.

Yeah. Volunteering is very much ingrained in what I get up to, I really enjoy the kind of stuff that goes on and I think there's so many transferable skills, just by volunteering, that you can gain quite easily. And I think that's kind of what I would emphasise today, just how much time and energy you give, it really does make a difference to the kind of skills set you can leave uni with potentially.

**Katie:**

So Aaron, what are you studying at the moment? And how did you first get into volunteering?

**Aaron:** I study at Moray College UHI, sociology and politics, so it's quite a big subject area. My volunteering kind of stemmed from just me turning up, in those good old days when we could just turn up at things. So I jumped right in, as a session leader at my local group in Portsoy. So I started doing all the face to face kind of stuff and helping out of the young people. And then it gradually just became more and more as I enjoyed it and just loved going along every kind of Wednesday night. So we did all kinds of things like camping, all the traditional kind of stuff and did a Food Bank driver as well which took in about three months' worth of food.

And then I went away to Romania, with the Scout Association, so I really enjoyed that and I completed my explorer belt which is one of the highest awards you can get. So I had a chat with the team and they were quite keen to have my board in a bigger capacity so I took on the role as assistant regional Commissioner doing communication for the whole of the northeast of Scotland. I just kind of went from the low section level to that kind of role.

**Katie:**

So you've really worked your way up! I don't think everyone would associate volunteering with all these amazing opportunities and obviously you've created a very good impression, but to be able to get to places like Romania, tell us a bit more about that, what was it like? what did you do while you're there?

**Aaron:**

It's a fantastic experience. Basically the expedition itself, it's basically like a 10 day programme, so you go into another country that's also not familiar to you and you explore it. You do 10 different projects, there's one major project which you focus on and then 9 minor ones that kinda tag onto that. So you are doing a multitude of stuff and I think, for our main project we analysed the historical and cultural similarities between Romanian culture and Scottish culture, quite interesting doing that and finding out about religion and speaking to the locals especially, I really enjoyed that. And obviously, getting a tour around different places it was, it was genuinely amazing, it was just such a life changing experience.

**Katie:**

It sounds as if you get a real buzz from the community and engaging with new people. There are Scout groups across the country that people could get involved in?

**Aaron:**

Absolutely. There are hundreds of Scout groups across the country. The key focus has been to 'give skills for live for young people'. There's some people who do a weekly commitment to help out with the guys on the ground, and make sure we deliver these skills to life, so anything from abseiling, to arts and craft. It's all volunteer based, I've had a really varied time with the Scouts with all sorts of adventurous activities but also some really key community impact. The kind of role I'm in now, is just fantastic for my CV and especially, you know, the kind of media stuff that I'm doing So much experience you can get out of just spending an extra two hours a week, you know, there's so many different organisations out there that you can volunteer with.

**Katie:**

And I can feel the energy and the passion you have for it and that is infectious I think, I think you speaking will definitely make people think, ah I wonder what I could do locally. I guess you'll have had to have adapted in current times, with COVID and virtual delivery of stuff. Has that been a challenge? Have you felt you've had to kind of think on the problem solving front?

**Aaron:**

Absolutely. It's always problem solving during these current times in COVID-19, just to give everyone that extra helping hand and making sure that our young people are not disadvantaged or felt vulnerable. The Scouts have really achieved so much during the time, it's just phenomenal. It's a funny time to be around, I mean obviously you're just got to watch with the impact on your mental health and stuff like that, and this volunteering is really good as it just keeps your mind focused on something else.

**Katie:**

It's clear that volunteering has a really positive impact on health and wellbeing, not just for you, but for those in the community that you're supporting with the Scouts too. There's definitely some sort of ripple effect. Can we talk a little bit about skills? What skills do you think volunteering has helped you develop?

**Aaron:**

I'd probably have to say that the role I'm in currently as Head of Comms. It's quite an interesting and varied role. I mean there's a lot of social media kind of stuff that you've got in the mix, working with the media especially, that is quite challenging. You've got to pitch the right stories and make sure they are newsworthy. What I like about my kind of role is that I can fit it in around existing commitments such as work and uni life. There are some really flexible volunteering opportunities out there. I am sure there are so many charities that would be fantastic and really help you get what you need out of the role.

**Katie:**

You can juggle your studies, your volunteering, your work quite amicably. Is there anything else that kind of sticks out in your mind that volunteering has given you?

**Aaron:**

Your employability. I think there are so many facets to volunteering. Just knowing people and growing your circle. You know the social life that you get out of volunteering, it's just another kind of layer to the onion. Your confidence naturally, I think when you take on bigger challenges and when you really develop yourself it really puts you into situations that you might not otherwise be in. I think it does wonders for your confidence, just knowing that you can handle things that you didn't think you could. And I mean, I'm handling situations now that I might have just previously 'curled up in a ball' and say 'I can't do this'. It's quite interesting, in some ways, because you can just be able to take the risks and experiment with so many things. It definitely takes you out of your comfort zone at times. A lot of roles that you can do into that are particularly challenging just due to the nature of it, it can give you a good challenge. And it's very stimulating academically, as well, so it does invigorate you to keep going in your studies, and career development particularly.

**Katie:**

Thank you so much Aaron, I really appreciate your time and I am inspired to think about what opportunities there are and it sounds like it's really helped you.

**Aaron:**

Yeah, no worries at all. At the end of the day, if it's promoting volunteering to students, it really does need to happen in my opinion. I think so many students should be volunteering.

**Katie:**

I think often people think they have to give more, or that it's going to be you know a long term commitment that they can't offer, whereas actually like you say, start small and see how you go.

So next up, speaking to Holly young. Welcome, Holly, can you tell us a little bit about you to get started.

**Holly:**

Yeah, so I have just finished doing my MSc in archaeological practice with UHI and I previously did my undergraduate with UHI in 2012. I've had such a fantastic experience at this university which is why I keep coming back. Especially in the archaeology department, I find it very sort of supportive and encouraging environment. You forget that you are actually in an environment filled with world class people in their fields.

**Katie:**

So you have done a fair bit of volunteering over the years, and we'd love to hear a bit more about that.

**Holly:**

Well the entirety of my volunteering has been with the UHI and it's been in the archaeology department. I think it would have been the summer of 2013 so after the end of my first year, when I went and did my first dig, which was at the cairns in South Ronaldsay, big iron age site. That was part of the course and then after that I just sort of kept digging and doing different projects every summer. Then I also did a lot of post ex volunteering in the department and I volunteered at a conference and things like that. Lots of bits and pieces, alongside the sort of summer dig season.

**Katie:**

What does a dig look like for someone who's thinking 'you volunteered digging'? What is that? It would be really interesting for those that that don't know.

**Holly:**

Well on Orkney, I've been hugely bless and the sites are incredible. I did digging as my job in Gloucestershire for three years. And for most of the part of dig looks like a muddy hole in the ground. But like here it's like these amazing upstanding prehistoric monuments and sort of lots of amazing medical history and things like that. These sites are very impressive to see especially for the first time. It's kind of like a reunion every summer, because you get a lot of the same people coming back every year. So like you've got the added excitement of just like getting to see your friends again. And Yeah, it's very much a team effort and I mean, especially on these sites where you've got field schools and things like that so everyone's learning and I mean archaeology is constantly, constantly learning stuff. You never really, you never know everything. And so yeah, it's just it's a really nice atmosphere of enthusiastic people wanting to learn and working together to do that.

**Katie:**

I'm interested to know if there was someone who initially inspired you to start volunteering.

**Holly:**

Well, I mean, even before university I have a history teacher, his name was Mr McKeend. I remember he was like my favourite teacher at school. And I found out that he had previously been an archaeologist so I just thought that was amazing. I think every Scottish

students studies Skara Brae at some point or another. And I ended up coming to do archaeology. I was really excited about the prospect of going dig because I mean it's what archaeologists do isn't it, they dig. I mean I'd done the classic thing like watching Time Team and things like that, the sort of story every archaeologist has. And then, the site director at the cairns always talked very enthusiastically about the cairns and I really am really interested in the Iron Age and that's what I've studied and stuff. It's just really excited and then it ended up being that sort of thing that spurred me through all the sort of academic stuff. So it's like, 'well, I've just got to get through to the summer work and then I can dig again'.

**Katie:**

And are there any other benefits that you feel volunteering has brought to your life?

**Holly:**

I've learnt a lot and a lot of stuff that has really helped me in my career and things like that but also just the social side of it is so important. It really helped me build confidence and I mean I met a lot of really amazing people. I think it brought me out of my shell quite a lot, especially when you get to the stage where you kind of know what you're doing and you're sort of taking on a little bit more responsibility with younger students who don't have those skills yet.

**Katie:**

Do you have any words of advice for getting started and finding opportunities like the ones you've experienced in Orkney.

**Holly:**

Absolutely. I mean, I am very aware that I'm incredibly blessed to have been on Orkney with so many digs and I know it's a lot harder for other people further south and stuff, to find archaeological opportunities for volunteering. I mean a lot of places have their own sort of local like amateur archaeology groups, like clubs, and things like that, and they're usually really good people to get in contact with for that kind of thing. And I mean people come to the digs every year who aren't doing courses or anything like that, they just genuinely really interested. It's something that I know is incredibly daunting but there's nothing to be daunted about. Everyone is always going to be super friendly, it's just always nice to have a mix of people.

**Katie:**

That's really encouraging to hear, and get a sense of the kind of community spirit in it. Do you think you'll always continue to volunteer in some capacity?

**Holly:**

I think I'll probably always do bits and pieces. Obviously I got a bit big from my boots when I started getting paid to do it. So it's kind of hard to align yourself with going back to doing it for free, once you've been doing it for your wage. But I mean, a lot of these projects, up here, that I've been doing since I was 18. They're passion projects and especially like, places like the Cairns and the Ness of Brodgar, I've done it for that many years that it's such a joy to be able to go back. I think I'll probably always have a little bit of volunteering. I mean I came

back, so I did a art and archaeology research project for a couple of summers. I came back in my holiday weeks. So, I mean, yeah, I think it will probably always be something I'll manage to convince myself to do every year.

**Katie:**

And actually, when you talk about having full time work now in that field, that volunteering must have been massively influential in getting that job so having that experience?

**Holly:**

It really does set you in good stead for digging. and I mean, I got offered my first job at Ness of Brodgar when I was there. Sarah Cobain who's one of the supervisors of the Ness, she also works for Cotswold Archaeology. So she interviewed me there. And that's how I got my job. Essentially, it was through digging at the Ness.

**Katie:**

Oh, that's a perfect example. Thank you so much for your time Holly. It's been really interesting speaking to you about your volunteering experience.

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